

Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* 'rediscovered' in northern Cameroon

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L'Amarante de Reichenow *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* 'redécouvert' au nord du Cameroun. Une petite population de l'Amarante de Reichenow *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* a été trouvée récemment au nord du Cameroun, près de la ville de Poli. L'espèce n'a apparemment pas été signalée depuis de nombreuses années et cette localité est probablement la seule qui soit actuellement connue pour cet amarante.

Summary. A small population of Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* has recently been located in northern Cameroon adjacent to the town of Poli. The species has apparently not been reported for many years and this population probably represents the only currently known locality for the species.

Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* was described in 1910, by Reichenow, from a single moulting juvenile male taken at Sakdje, North Cameroon (within the boundaries of modern-day Bénoué National Park). It has remained a poorly known and rarely recorded species ever since, and has at various times been 'lumped' with Jameson's Firefinch *L. rhodopareia* (e.g., Clement *et al.* 1993). In 1977, J. Brunel discovered a small population at Moundou, south-western Chad, which was tentatively described by Énard & Roche (1977) as a new subspecies of Jameson's Firefinch (*L. r. bruneli*), although this name was subsequently deemed a synonym of *umbrinodorsalis* (Fry & Keith 2004); five males and a single female were collected and currently reside in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris. Given the apparent paucity of information concerning Chad Firefinch, it is not listed by BirdLife International on the IUCN 'Red List' as the organisation currently recognises the taxon as a subspecies of Jameson's Firefinch, although this treatment is currently being reviewed by the BirdLife Taxonomic Working Group (J. Bird *in litt.* 2007).

Whilst working in northern Cameroon, and based in the town of Poli, I conducted a number of birdwatching excursions and, on 19 August 2007, whilst searching an area where I had previously observed Emin's Shrike *Lanius gubernator*, I flushed a small group of firefinches *Lagonosticta* sp. My initial impression was that they were Blue-billed Firefinch *L. rubricata* but as this would have been at the northernmost limit of the species'

range (Borrow & Demey 2004) I studied a male carefully and was immediately struck by the uniform pale grey tone to the crown and nape. At this point I decided to try to photograph the birds and, after careful stalking, was able to obtain a series of average images (Figs. 1–2). On reviewing these, and Borrow & Demey (2004), I became more convinced I had found Chad Firefinch, as the all-grey crown and nape is considered a key character in its separation from Blue-billed Firefinch.

I subsequently sent the photographs to R. Demey, who also forwarded them to N. Borrow, and both agreed with my identification. R. B. Payne later reviewed the same photographs and also concurred that the birds were Chad Firefinch. I returned to the site on 26 August 2007 and spent some time studying the birds, as well as securing good photographs of a female (Fig. 3). The latter was strikingly different to Blue-billed Firefinch and superficially resembled female Rock Firefinch *L. sanguinodorsalis*. The latter species can, however, be discounted based on the male's possession of an all-grey crown and nape (the latter is red in Rock Firefinch), and a warm brown mantle (red in Rock). The specific name of Rock Firefinch, *sanguinodorsalis*, was chosen by Payne to highlight this key identification feature from Chad Firefinch, *umbrinodorsalis*.

As already mentioned, separation from male Blue-billed Firefinch was based upon the completely uniform grey crown and nape, and the warm brown mantle coloration. The West African race (*congica*) of Blue-billed Firefinch is described in the literature as showing some warm reddish



Figures 1–2. Adult male Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* in 'breeding' plumage, August 2007.

Note the strong contrast between the pale grey crown and nape, and the warm brown mantle, as well as the relatively long, bicoloured bill (Nigel Voaden)

Amarante de Reichenow *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis*, mâle adulte en plumage 'nuptial', août 2007. Noter le contraste bien marqué entre la calotte et la nuque gris pâle et le manteau brun chaud, ainsi que le bec relativement long et bicolore (Nigel Voaden)

Figure 3. Adult female Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis*, August 2007. Note the large red loreal spot, uniform pinkish-red underparts and warm brown mantle and wings. *Contra* literature descriptions, the female does not show a pinkish wash to the cheeks; the bicoloured bill is clearly visible (Nigel Voaden)

Amarante de Reichenow *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis*, femelle adulte, août 2007. Noter la grande tache loreale rouge, les parties inférieures uniformément rouge rosâtre

et le manteau et les ailes brun chaud. *Contra* les descriptions dans la littérature, la femelle n'a pas les joues lavées de rose; le bec bicolore est bien visible (Nigel Voaden)

Figure 4. Adult male Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis* in 'non-breeding' plumage, February 2008. Superficially resembles the 'breeding' plumage but is duller and 'scruffier'; the eye-ring is quite prominent in this individual, but field observations suggest this feature is usually less obvious at this season (Nigel Voaden)

Amarante de Reichenow *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis*, mâle adulte en plumage 'inter-nuptial', février 2008. Ressemble au mâle en plumage 'nuptial' mais est plus terné; le cercle oculaire est assez prononcé chez cet individu, mais les observations sur le terrain indiquent que ce caractère est d'habitude moins visible en cette saison (Nigel Voaden)

Figure 5. Presumed immature male Chad Firefinch *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis*, March 2008. This individual resembles the adult female, having a very similar head pattern, but the breast and belly are warm brown (like the upperparts), strongly contrasting with the throat and vent (Nigel Voaden)

Amarante de Reichenow *Lagonosticta umbrinodorsalis*, présumé mâle immature, mars 2008. Cet individu ressemble à la femelle adulte, ayant le pattern de la tête similaire, mais la poitrine et le ventre sont brun chaud (comme les parties supérieures), contrastant fortement avec la gorge et le bas-ventre (Nigel Voaden)

brown in the crown and nape, and a colder more olive-brown mantle, which diagnosis is confirmed by photographs of specimens held at the Natural History Museum, Tring, taken by N. Borrow. Literature on the female plumage of Chad Firefinch is scarce, but female Blue-billed Firefinch has a red throat and brown belly, whereas the female Chad Firefinches I observed exhibited a pinkish-red belly and breast extending in a narrow strip onto the chin. The rest of the head was grey with a large red loreal spot. This is slightly at odds with the descriptions in Énard & Roche (1977) and Fry & Keith (2004) (presumably made from the same specimen), which clearly state that the cheeks of female Chad Firefinch are washed pink, although this may be an overstated feature (R. B. Payne *in litt.* 2007). Chad Firefinch exhibits a two-toned bill, paler at the base, and similar to that of Rock and Kulikoro Firefinches *L. virata*, but dissimilar to the rather monotone bill of Blue-billed. The bill is also rather long and similar in shape to that of Rock and Kulikoro, but dissimilar again to Blue-billed, which tends to be shorter. What are inferred to be immature males (Fig. 5) were observed in early March 2008. Superficially these resembled females, but the breast and belly were concolorous with the wings and back (warm brown), and contrasted more sharply with the vinous throat and vent. They also lacked the white 'starring' on the breast-sides typical of most *Lagonosticta*, including Chad Firefinch. The birds were sound-recorded singing (see below) and thus identified as males. The possibility that these individuals might be adult males in heavy moult cannot be eliminated, but other males in 'non-breeding' plumage were observed at the same time, the plumage of which was essentially a duller version of the 'breeding' plumaged males observed in August–December. This plumage corresponds with that of the type specimen in Berlin (a moulting juvenile male), although the underparts of the specimen possess a distinct pinkish-red wash and it is thus inferred to be in more advanced plumage than that depicted in Fig. 5.

The birds call near-continuously, although the rattling alarm-call *pipipit* (Fry & Keith 2004) and a high-pitched *tsee*, most probably a contact call, are by far the most common vocalisations, and a range of further vocalisations very similar to that of Blue-billed Firefinch including songs have been noted. According to Chappuis (2000) and

Borrow & Demey (2004) the calls of the two species are very similar. The birds are not especially responsive to playback but do occasionally exhibit 'interest' in the recording of Chad Firefinch (15:27 on Chappuis 2000; where it is listed as Jameson's Firefinch), made in south-west Chad in 1977 by J. Brunel, whilst never responding to playback of Blue-billed Firefinch. They are also often responsive to 'pishing' and poor imitations of the alarm-call. Sound-recordings of calling and singing immature males were made in March 2008 and sent to R. B. Payne, whose early analysis suggests at least six different song and call types can be identified.

The birds were initially found frequenting the environs of well-vegetated streams and rivers, set in a sparsely vegetated plain (at *c.*400 m), although some individuals were noted in dense vegetation at higher elevations (up to 1,250 m) on nearby granitic massifs. With the onset of the dry season sightings on the plain became fewer and by January they could only be found at higher elevations (above 800 m), where vegetation is denser and water more available. This localised altitudinal movement is inferred to be in response to annual habitat cycles on the plain, where watercourses are ephemeral and most vegetation is burnt. The birds can be expected to return to the plain with the onset of the wet season in May/June. Suitable habitat is abundant in the area and the species is inferred to be locally common. The males exhibit swollen eye-rings and brighter plumage during the wet season (August–November at least but probably also earlier); immatures were first noted in March, so the species presumably breeds at higher elevations. During the dry season they often form large feeding flocks (of up to 50 birds), feeding on steep, grassy, rocky slopes.

The area is easily accessible in the wet season when the firefinches are present on the plain, but during the dry season occur in a more remote area requiring a four-wheel-drive vehicle to visit. Additionally, uranium exploration is ongoing in the area and the author should be contacted for advice before visiting. Nonetheless, to visit would represent only a minor detour from the standard Cameroon birding itineraries, being, for instance, potentially easily incorporated as part of a travel day between Waza and Bénoué National Parks, and, indeed, a recent bird tour visited the site and were rewarded with excellent views.

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